From Plural Oversight to the Singular Bishop

The Early Post-Apostolic Alteration of Local Church Governance

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Introduction

The passing of the apostles did not immediately bring an end to the recognizable local churches established during the first century. Early second-century writings still address churches associated with particular cities, preserving an important aspect of the apostolic pattern of locality. Yet continuity in locality did not necessarily mean continuity in every aspect of church order. One of the earliest and most consequential alterations concerned local oversight. The New Testament consistently presents plural elders as the overseers responsible for shepherding the local church, whereas the writings of Ignatius of Antioch strongly promote a singular bishop distinguished from and elevated above the presbyters—an arrangement commonly designated by church historians as the *monarchical episcopate*. The historical development is therefore best understood not as the sudden disappearance of the local churches, but as the gradual alteration of apostolic oversight within churches that continued to be identified according to locality.

The Apostolic Pattern of Local Oversight

The first-century canonical record presents a remarkably consistent pattern. Paul and Barnabas "appointed elders in every church" (Acts 14:23). When Paul later summoned the elders of the church in Ephesus, he told those same men that the Holy Spirit had made them overseers to shepherd the church of God (Acts 20:17, 28). Elder and overseer were therefore not two ecclesiastical ranks. The elders were the overseers, and their responsibility was the shepherding care of the local flock.

The same relationship appears in Paul's instruction to Titus. Titus was charged to "appoint elders in every city" (Titus 1:5), after which Paul immediately describes the qualifications required of "an overseer" (Titus 1:7). Philippians 1:1 likewise addresses all the saints in Philippi "with the bishops and deacons," using the plural form for the overseers. Peter similarly exhorts the elders to shepherd the flock of God and exercise oversight, while explicitly warning them not to act as lords over those entrusted to them (1 Pet. 5:1–3). Taken together, these passages establish plural local oversight without placing a singular bishop above the elders.

Responsibility Rather Than Ecclesiastical Rank

The key to understanding authority in the apostolic churches is responsibility rather than rank. The New Testament does not portray the church as a religious hierarchy patterned after civil government. Jesus explicitly contrasted authority among His followers with the rulers of the nations who lord it over others (Matt. 20:25–28). The church nevertheless possessed genuine authority and order. Apostles bore apostolic responsibility, elders exercised oversight, and various members functioned according to the measure of grace and gift given to them, but these distinctions of function did not create separate spiritual classes among the believers.

Paul's own ministry illustrates this organic character. He could speak of himself as a spiritual father because through the gospel he had begotten the Corinthians in Christ (1 Cor. 4:15). Among the Thessalonians he compared the apostles both to a nursing mother cherishing her children and to a father exhorting and comforting his children (1 Thess. 2:7, 11). His authority arose in the context of life, labor, relationship, and responsibility. Even while exercising strong apostolic authority, Paul could say, "Not that we have dominion over your faith, but are fellow workers for your joy" (2 Cor. 1:24).

The Sparse New Testament Record Concerning Deacons

The New Testament recognizes deacons, but the details concerning their function are surprisingly sparse. Philippians 1:1 establishes that deacons existed alongside the overseers in the church in Philippi. First Timothy 3:8–13 supplies moral and household qualifications and states that deacons were to be tested before serving. It also specifies, "Let deacons be the husbands of one wife, ruling their children and their own houses well" (1 Tim. 3:12). Yet the New Testament never gives a corresponding statement that the apostles appointed deacons in every church, nor does it clearly define their governmental authority over the saints.

Acts 6 is often treated retrospectively as the appointment of the first deacons, but Luke never calls the seven selected men deacons. The passage uses words associated with service and serving, and the apostles prayed and laid hands upon the seven, but identifying them formally as the first deacons is an interpretation rather than an explicit statement of the text. The contrast with elders is significant: apostolic appointment of elders is plainly recorded, their shepherding responsibility is defined, and elders are explicitly identified as overseers. The record concerning deacons is much less developed and should not be expanded by reading later ecclesiastical structures backward into the first century.

The First-Century Seed of Preeminence

The absence of an approved hierarchy did not mean that the desire for personal preeminence was absent. The New Testament itself exposes this tendency. Jesus repeatedly corrected His disciples when they disputed about greatness, and Peter later warned elders against lording it over the flock. Near the close of the first century, John identifies Diotrephes as one "who loves to have the preeminence among them" (3 John 9). His desire for the first place produced practical consequences: he rejected apostolic fellowship, spoke maliciously against John and his associates, refused to receive the brethren, hindered others from receiving them, and put believers out of the church (3 John 9–10).

Diotrephes is therefore an important canonical witness to the danger that would confront the churches after the apostles. Responsibility could be transformed into position, and position into personal domination. Revelation likewise records the Lord's condemnation of the deeds and teaching of the Nicolaitans (Rev. 2:6, 15). The text does not explicitly define Nicolaitanism as a later clergy-laity hierarchy, so that identification should be presented as an interpretive application. Nevertheless, the canonical record clearly warns against preeminence, domination, and departures from the organic functioning of the members under Christ as Head.

Ignatius and the Formal Alteration of Oversight

The writings of Ignatius of Antioch, commonly dated to the early second century, are especially important because they demonstrate both continuity and alteration. The local-church aspect remained recognizable. Ignatius wrote to identifiable churches associated with Ephesus, Magnesia, Tralles, Rome, Philadelphia, and Smyrna. Thus the churches had not simply abandoned their geographical identity after the passing of the apostles. The concept of a church associated with a particular locality continued into the second century.

At the same time, Ignatius vigorously promoted an arrangement that differs from the apostolic pattern of oversight. His writings repeatedly distinguish one bishop from the presbyters and deacons and strongly emphasize submission to the singular bishop. The change is structurally significant. In Acts 20 and Titus 1, the elders themselves are the overseers. In the Ignatian arrangement, the bishop becomes a distinct individual standing in a position different from the presbytery. Thus the apostolic identification of elder and overseer was being formally altered.

Continuity of Locality, Alteration of Oversight

This development should not be described as though every feature of apostolic church life vanished at once. Historical deterioration was cumulative. The locality of the churches could remain recognizable while their internal governance was undergoing modification. Elders continued to exist, deacons continued to exist, and much of the original terminology remained in use. Yet the relationship among these functions was changing as a singular bishop became distinguished from the plural elders.

This distinction is essential for understanding the early post-apostolic transition. The significant alteration was not the creation of order where previously there had been none. The apostolic churches already possessed definite order. Rather, an organic order grounded in life, function, spiritual maturity, and responsibility was increasingly overlaid by positional distinctions and ecclesiastical rank. Once a singular overseer was elevated above the other elders, a structural principle existed from which increasingly hierarchical forms of church government could subsequently develop.

From Organic and Familial Responsibility to Ecclesiastical Rank

The first-century church life was remarkably organic and familial. Paul's dominant picture was the Body of Christ, composed of many members functioning according to life and gift (1 Cor. 12), but his relationship with the churches was also deeply familial. He regarded himself as a spiritual father who had begotten believers through the gospel (1 Cor. 4:15), and he could describe the apostles as both a nursing mother cherishing her children and a father exhorting and comforting his own

children (1 Thess. 2:7, 11). The believers were not primarily members of an ecclesiastical institution but members of the household of God, brothers and sisters sharing the same divine life under Christ as Head. When the church assembled, the principle was "each of you has" something for the building up of the church (1 Cor. 14:26). Elders bore particular responsibility for shepherding and oversight, but they remained among the saints and were forbidden to lord it over the flock. Deacons rendered recognized service, while the precise scope of their responsibilities remained comparatively undefined. Thus apostolic church order was characterized not merely by assigned responsibilities, but by organic function and familial relationships arising from the believers' common life in Christ.

The post-apostolic development therefore represents more than a change in terminology. The movement from plural elders who were themselves the overseers toward one bishop distinguished from and elevated above the presbyters contributed to a transition from organic and familial responsibility toward increasingly positional ecclesiastical rank. Ignatius cannot be demonstrated to have invented this development, since the tendency may already have existed before his surviving letters, but he stands among its earliest and most forceful surviving advocates. His promotion of the singular bishop consequently helped set in motion and reinforce a church order that differed materially from the pattern preserved in the apostolic writings.

Conclusion

The local churches continued recognizably into the second century, but continuity of locality should not be confused with complete continuity of apostolic church order. The canonical record presents plural elders as the overseers of the local churches, charged with shepherding responsibility while being forbidden to lord it over the saints. It contains no approved ranked hierarchy of bishop over elder, elder over deacon, and clergy over the saints. Even before the close of the first century, however, Diotrephes demonstrated the human desire for preeminence within the church. Shortly thereafter, Ignatius promoted the formal distinction and elevation of a singular bishop above the presbyters. The evidence therefore indicates an early and consequential transition: the local churches continued, but apostolic teaching concerning their plural local oversight was already being altered.

Selected Scripture References

- Acts 14:23 — Elders appointed in every church.
- Acts 20:17, 28 — The elders of Ephesus identified as overseers charged to shepherd the church.
- Philippians 1:1 — All the saints in Philippi with the plural overseers and deacons.
- Titus 1:5–7 — Elders appointed in every city; the elder described as an overseer.
- 1 Peter 5:1–3 — Elders charged to shepherd and oversee without lording it over the flock.
- 1 Corinthians 4:15–16 — Paul's spiritual fatherhood through the gospel.
- 2 Corinthians 1:24 — Apostolic authority without dominion over the saints' faith.
- 1 Corinthians 12:12–27 — The church as the organic Body of Christ.
- 1 Corinthians 14:26 — The functioning of the members for mutual building up.
- 1 Timothy 3:8–13 — Qualifications and testing of deacons.
- 3 John 9–10 — Diotrephes loving preeminence and exercising exclusionary control.
- Revelation 2:6, 15 — The deeds and teaching of the Nicolaitans condemned by the Lord.